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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: July 1, 1977

F. de Argentina

SUBJECT:

Human Rights in Argentina

PARTICIPANTS:

Senor Hipolito Solari Yrigoyen, Ex-Senator of
Argentina - a member of the Radical Party
Assistant Secretary Todman
Robert W. Zimmermann - ARA/ECA
George Lister - ARA
Joseph Eldridge - WOLA

Beginning the substantive portion of the conversation: Solari Yrigoyen noted that he is a member of the Radical Party which is entering its hundredth year. As a leader of that party he had frequently travelled over all of Argentina preaching the cause of peace and law and that it is impossible to combat terrorism with counter-terrorism. He said that he is against all kinds of violence and extremism, including the extremes of the central Government, and the latter is what lead to his nine months in jail with gross mistreatment.

Continuing, Yrigoyen said that the present U.S. policy regarding human rights has awakened great hopes among the people. Authoritarian governments do not represent the people. This new hope arises from the fact that the people believe the U.S. now is a friend of democracy and not of authoritarian governments. But there will be of course be many voices raised against the new U.S. policy. In Argentina many arguments will be put up against it. For example, it will be claimed that it is indispensable to violate human rights in order to combat terrorism. But of course the only true road is through law and order. It has been his thesis, he said, that it is not necessary to go to either one extreme or another. The immense majority of the Argentine people are democratic. Authoritarian governments try to simulate certain aspects of democracy but they are not democratic; for example, they give out false signs such as releasing a number of prisoners one day, only to arrest twice as many the next week. The opening process must be pushed as the issue of human rights is a great moral force.

ARA/ECA:RWZimmermann
(Drafting Office and Officer)

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Ambassador Todman said that he very much appreciated the statement of his views, and asked what possibilities for progress he saw. Yrigoyen responded that it would probably not be possible to make much immediate progress, but the democratic spirit is in the people and the military government needs U.S. encouragement. While the government may be irritated over U.S. policies, it needs U.S. support. The moral value of human rights weighs heavily and should be helpful in gradually pushing the government in the right direction. In Latin America the frontiers of democracy are extending slowly.

Ambassador Todman noted that Yrigoyen was now living in Venezuela and asked what effect he thought President Perez might have had on Videla during the latter's recent visit.

In response, Yrigoyen said that Venezuela's leadership role both politically and economically makes it necessary for Venezuela to be in contact with many countries. Venezuela needs Argentina as it does not have a structure that is inherently solid. It lacks certain resources vital to its national interests and therefore must make arrangement, for example, for an exchange of products. On balance, the visit was probably beneficial. He said he understood Perez talked to Videla with complete frankness. Nevertheless he could not really judge from inside Venezuela what the effect will be in Argentina. Yrigoyen pointed out that his release was really due to the Videla trip, as Perez had asked for his release by phone just prior to the visit.

Ambassador Todman remarked that his own visit to Caracas had coincided with the beginning of Videla's visit and that he had had an opportunity to talk with Videla; he had explained to him frankly the United States position, expressly emphasizing that a government which violates its own laws loses any moral force it might otherwise have.

Yrigoyen said that the present level of terrorism in Argentina is not as great as advertised; it is used as an excuse for other purposes. For the last two years few prisoners have been taken and of the fifteen to twenty thousand prisoners in Argentina today, eighty percent have nothing to do with subversion. The charge of subversion is simply a pretext to put down civil and human rights. Ambassador Todman asked what charges were levied against this eighty percent. Yrigoyen responded that six thousand prisoners should really be subject to civil process, and most others fall into the category of imprisonment on false pretext.

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In conclusion, Ambassador Todman said he very much appreciated having this opportunity to learn Mr. Yrigoyen's views. He said it is clear that we must continue to fight for human dignity, not only of the person, but for civil and political values as well. We must try to go forward on all fronts.

cc: AmEmb Buenos Aires
✓D/HA (Mark Schneider)
ARA/ECA (Fred Rondon)

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